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SHOW

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and the
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The Decolonizer of the Black Mind: MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Like the hero of his motion picture, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Melvin Van Peebles is a baadasssss, an aggressive, singleminded, ballsy, militant black man who has taken on Hollywood's motion picture establishment and beaten it at its own game. He has become almost an archetype of polite white society's idea of a bad black man. He is independent, successful, brash and boastful. He has made it without white sponsorship or assistance. He maintains a militant political position yet works within the system with notable success, all the while criticizing the society he thrives in. He sacrifices almost anything to achieve his ends which are usually designed not only to help himself but the people of the Third World as well. Anyone who objects to being used to some degree, will soon dislike him. Most of all, Van Peebles is immensely effective at making it in the white world as a proud black man and he refuses to show the slightest bit of gratitude for the opportunity. He figures he deserves it. He's trying desperately hard to teach this same lesson to the rest of the black population.

As producer, director, writer, editor, star and composer of the score of *Sweet Sweetback*, he has created an energetic agitprop chase film in which the good guys are black, the bad guys are white and the black man wins no moral victories; he just wins.

The film earned a landslide negative vote from the white critics. It also earned a large and admiring urban white audience and an ecstatically enthusiastic black audience of such huge dimensions that we can expect a barrage of 'militant black films' a la Hollywood in the near future. Based on the success of early playdates industry experts predict, *Sweet Sweetback* will become the largest grossing independently made American film in history. And to anyone who understands the racial attitudes of the motion picture industry this comes as no surprise. Hollywood, for many years, has been feeding the black motion picture audience a diet of action films, horror films and sex films. If a black star is available, Hollywood sticks him in one of these... if one isn't, the formula is enough. Well, recently it stopped working. Sidney Poi-

tier and Jim Brown each had a couple of flops in a row. Downtown urban theaters, which attract mainly a black audience, have been suffering from a bad case of empty seats. The black audience has apparently had enough of that kind of product.

The time was obviously ripe for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. It's the study of Sweetback, a black pimp who is radicalized when two white policemen beat up a young militant in his presence. Sweetback beats on the cops, goes on the run, kills two cops when cornered later in the film and escapes in the end, vowing to come back to "collect some dues."

The black audiences have trouble believing their eyes at first. When the film began its premiere engagement in Detroit, it played predominantly to a nervous, silent, black crowd. Everyone knew that Sweetback had to get it in the end. The audience sat for moments in stunned silence when he made it safely to the Mexican border, promising to return. Then the word got around and at later performances the mood of the audience was entirely different. Knowing in advance that the black man wins this time, it became a cheering section.

One white critic wrote, "This film is only for those idiots in the theater who shout 'right on' to the unhearing silver screen." "Right On!" agrees Van Peebles. Many other critics charge that the film is anti-white, Van Peebles replies, "It's anti-white if a film about the Gestapo is anti-white. No young person who's been hassled by the cops will think it's anti-white. It's anti-justice." Virtually all of the men who control the large theaters across the country agreed with the critics when they were offered the film. No playdates could be obtained. Then a big barn in downtown Detroit called the Grand Circus agreed to an engagement. The theater has been averaging about \$4,000 a week for the previous few years, playing third and fourth run product.

Sweet Sweetback grossed over \$200,000 in its first four weeks. A theater in Atlanta agreed to play the film and the results were equally impressive. Suddenly all of the biggest and best theaters in the country found room for this "anti-white"

"We can't make films for only black men."

production. "The white man," says Van Peebles, "has an Achilles pocketbook." He's learned that the hard way. Though he refuses to discuss his past with interviewers claiming it gives the white media the opportunity to single him out as a "special black," research reveals that he was born and raised in Chicago. He graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University and served for three years in the Air Force as a navigator. He was married during this period and later divorced. His two children, Mario and Megan, have roles in *Sweet Sweetback*. On his discharge from the Air Force, he moved to San Francisco where he worked on the cable cars and, with a photographer friend, wrote a book, *The Big Heart*, about the cars and the city. He also became interested in filmmaking at this point and made several short films.

He took his films to Hollywood in search of a beginner's job in the industry. He was offered two—elevator operator and parking lot attendant... He decided he'd do better in Europe so, taking advantage of his G.I. bill, Van Peebles applied for entrance in the graduate school of astronomy at the University of Leyden in Holland. His college degree is in English but he figured his air force navigation training would enable him to at least get by. He left school shortly after arriving in Holland and joined the Dutch National Theatre as an actor. While on tour he was contacted by Henri Langlois of the prestigious French Cinematheque who had seen some of his short films and who invited him to Paris. He enjoyed some brief cinecult celebrity but was soon singing and dancing on the streets for centimes and writing in his spare time. Working in self-taught French, he completed and had published five novels and became an editor of the French humor magazine, *Hari Kiri*. Then he learned that French law requires the directors guild to give a union card to any author who wants to direct a film made from his own work, so Van Peebles wrote a novel, *The Story Of a Three Day Pass*, turned it into a screenplay and, armed with a French governmental subsidy and money from a rich French woman, produced and directed it as a film. It was a major hit in Europe, a *succes d'estime* and modest financial success in this country and it made Melvin Van Peebles a celebrity, the first black American of modern time to direct a feature motion picture.

Hollywood got nervous. It was the time of the first stirrings of black power and much of the white establishment was nervous. So when Melvin pointed out to



In *Sweetback* Simon Shuckster is harassed by police who shoot a gun off by his ear because he will not reveal *Sweetback's* whereabouts.

the press at the San Francisco Film Festival, which he attended with *Three Day Pass* as the French delegate, that the first black American director in memory had to go to France to work. Hollywood quickly made offers. Come to us and direct the life of Ethel Waters—or Frederick Douglass—or Malcolm X. He turned them down flat. "If I had gone for that by-gones be by-gones routine, Hollywood would have had its token black and would have slammed the door shut again." Instead, he translated his first French novel into English which was published as *A Bear For The F.B.I.* and he wrote the music for and performed on a record album, "Brer Soul."

When Columbia Pictures asked him to direct a satire on black-white relations, *Watermelon Man*, he accepted. "Two other brothers had gotten in, as I predicted. So now I felt it was time to attack the fortress itself—good old Hollywood. Frankly, *Watermelon-Man* wise, I changed it less than I hoped and learned more than I expected." *Watermelon Man* was the story of an obnoxious white man who inexplicably turns black and learns a little about the nature of white American society. Melvin won his first battle when he got the studio to substitute a black actor who worked in white face for its original assumption, a white actor in black face. But the war had just begun. Rumors of trouble on the set began to circulate. They were true. The cast and

director did not get along. The crew and director did not get along. Indeed, the producers and the director did not get along.

The reasons were varied. Melvin Van Peebles is not an easy man, either as a friend, employer or employee. He knows what he wants and demands it. He is brutally honest and no believer in either compromise or sweet reason. In the best of circumstances, he is aggressive, strong willed and persistent. One of the stars of the film, Estelle Parsons, says, "I love Melvin. He's a gentle, sweet man but on the set he was a fascist. Everyday I'd promise myself, 'Today I won't fight with him' and then he'd go and ignore one of my suggestions or say something cruel and off we'd go. All during the production I was thinking, 'If he'd gone to Princeton and had that middle-class background of all the other people in this business, he'd be an absolute giant in the motion picture industry today.'"

The other side of the coin, of course, is that in Hollywood, the crews that make movies, don't like movies, they work on them. It's a job and they are essentially hard hats. They did not welcome Van Peebles. The studio executives, for their part, were scared to death over what would emerge on the screen. Word circulated that a black nationalist film was being made on their lot. Yet the picture got made. Then Van Peebles' own producer and the production executives at

"...I felt it was time to attack the fortress itself—good old Hollywood."



In his film, Sweetback and his sidekick shoot two cops who try to capture them.

the studio tried to take the film away and recut it. Quite an uneven battle: unknown black director vs. studio brass and his own producer.

Van Peebles slaughtered them. *Watermelon Man* was released exactly as he made and cut it, with an advertising campaign of his own design. In the period preceding the making of *Watermelon Man*, Melvin maintained an essentially non-political pose, concerned with the future of the black man in the motion picture industry and in general but not overly aggressive about it. This was a calculated position. "I had to get my game together," he explains. "They wouldn't have let me make a film in Hollywood if I wasn't potentially at least their idea of a good nigger. And I had to make *Watermelon Man* in order to make possible the films I really wanted to do."

He was now able to realistically proceed with *Sweet Sweetback*. He found all the production money, either in his own bank account or from other black sources. Most of his equipment, film and technical expenses were deferred until the release of the film which was shot all over Southern California in 20 days, with a 19 man, non-union crew. Over half the crew was "third world"—nearly half of them had never seen a motion picture camera before. The scoring, editing and opticals for the film took another seven months, an unusually extended period that shows in the final product. He wound

up with the first major feature film made in this country by a black man that was in no way influenced by white men... not financially, technically or conceptually. For the first time, a film expressing the black sensibility, undiluted, had made it to the screen. He also personally sold the musical sound track (which he wrote) to Stax Records, a black operated firm, and is assured of a gold record off current sales. As part of his marketing package, he wrote and sold to Lancer Books a journal on the making of the film.

Van Peebles refuses to discuss the cost of *Sweet Sweetback*. "No one asks Picasso what blue gouache was selling for and how thickly he applied it before they buy a painting. The price of any piece of art is a question of its value, not its cost!" Though he is certain to earn an enormous amount of money from these assorted areas, Van Peebles is unlikely to change his life style much. He lives out of a knapsack and works out of small apartments he keeps in Paris and Los Angeles and a loft in New York. He has no visible taste for luxury. He dresses like a laborer; levis, boots and tee shirt when working; sweaters and slacks otherwise. He has never been seen in a tie. His language is salty, his humor basic. His approach to life—"I am what I am, baby. You don't like it? That's your problem." He is a complex personality, gentle with friends and children, impenetrably tough professionally. He strongly resists what he calls "deifica-

tion;" he won't sign autographs nor would he list himself in the credits as the star of *Sweet Sweetback*. His fear is that he'll be preempted as a white culture hero (a la Poitier perhaps) and lose his identification with his average black audience.

He hopes he is the forerunner of a large, dynamic black film industry that will make meaningful films for an international audience while maintaining their roots in Black American culture.

"We can't make films for only black men," he says. "Of course, as blacks, we'll make films that reflect our rich cultural heritage but if they're any good, their universality of the human experience will transcend the race and creed and crap frontiers." Van Peebles has two major projects scheduled for the fall. First, a Broadway play he wrote, based on his first two record albums, "Brer Soul" and "Ain't Suppose To Die a Natural Death," will be produced. Then he'll start on his next feature film, *Don't Play Me Cheap*, a comedy musical based on *Harlem Party*, a play which he wrote during his stay in Europe. Melvin Van Peebles' aim with all his work is what he calls "the decolonization of the black mind." He says, "Of all the ways we've been exploited by 'the man,' the most damaging is the way he's destroyed our self-image. The message of *Sweet Sweetback* is that if you can get it together and stand up to the man, you can win."

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